



UNITED STATES
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

World Refugee Day
Remarks By Congresswomen Betty McCollum
June 20, 2005

Thank you for the opportunity to join you all for World Refugee Day. I am very proud to represent in the U.S. Congress thousands and thousands of refugees who live in St. Paul and the East Metro area. Whether they are originally from East Asia, East Africa, Eastern Europe or Central America, Minnesota is now their home and we call them our neighbors, our co-workers and our friends.

The resettlement of refugees in Minnesota is a success story. We should all celebrate the economic, social and cultural contributions made over the past generation who found peace, hope and opportunity in Minnesota. For the refugees and the communities that welcomed them it has not always been easy, but it has worked and worked to the benefit of our state.

Let me acknowledge the state, county and local government officials as well as the staff and educators from our school districts who work so hard to get families settled and transitioned to life in Minnesota. Let me also thank the resettlement agencies, community based non-profits, the faith community and the many families and volunteers. This collective effort has kept the refugee resettlement experience positive for both new Minnesotans as well as long-time residents.

While today is a celebration of sorts, I do not want anyone here to forget that suffering also continues for the more than 19 million people around the world fleeing persecution. The fact that more than nine million people are refugees and almost eight million more are internally displaced inside their own country due to violence – while millions more are stateless or seeking asylum.

Earlier this year I traveled to Eastern Chad to visit refugees in camps along the border of Sudan's Darfur region. The men, women and children I met had escaped the horrors of mass murder, mass rape, the burning of their villages, the killing of their animals and the poisoning of their wells. These exhausted souls were the survivors a genocide that continues to go on today – at this very moment.

Just as Minnesota has been a refuge – a place of safety, I want to publicly commend the people of Chad, a very, very poor nation with difficult geography, little water and few resources, for providing nearly a million Sudanese survivors of genocide a safe place. In normal times the people of Chad have very little, now they are sharing what they have with the Darfur refugees.

In Darfur, at least 180,000 people have been killed, starved to death or died of disease because of the intentional campaign of cleansing by the militias sponsored by the government of Sudan. Tens of thousand of women and girls have been raped and tortured in this campaign of terror.

Inside Sudan almost 2 million people are displaced – driven from their homes. Let me praise the work that Hugh Parmer and his staff at the American Refugee Committee are doing to keep people alive in Sudan – they are true heroes.

In the camp I visited in Chad the women were exhausted, the children were restless and the men were few – most had been killed. The struggles of daily life were unimaginable – little water, little food, almost no shelter and only very limited health services. The trauma of escaping genocide, surviving rape, watching ones family be murdered is almost too much to comprehend.

Yet, these brave souls fight on to care for their children, hope for the future and work together to make the most of every day.

The people of the U.S. are helping – and helping a lot. More than \$1 billion in aid and emergency humanitarian relief has been provided to keep people alive. The courageous humanitarian workers who help deliver this relief take big risks and work tirelessly and they deserve both our praise and our prayers.

The crisis in Darfur is man-made, not some natural catastrophe. This is genocide – mass, planned murder of thousands. This is a horror. Ending the genocide in Darfur requires more than humanitarian aid – it requires the political will of nations – especially the United States – willing to stand up and say these lives have value – his killing must be stopped. Every diplomatic, political, and if necessary, -- military tool -- must be used to stop the killing.

This brings me to a disturbing and shameful recent episode. For all the good the U.S. has done with humanitarian relief for the victims of Darfur – our government is also appears committed to working with the perpetrators of the genocide.

It was recently reported that in April of this year, a U.S. government jet owned by the CIA flew Major General Salah Abdullah Gosh – the head of Sudan's intelligence agency – to Washington for meetings with high level CIA officials. This was a reward for his government's work with the U.S. on the war on terrorism.

The government of Sudan is officially designated a "state sponsor of terrorism." The government of Sudan has participated in the murder and terrorizing to tens of thousands of their own citizens. The women and children I met in the refugee camps were victims of the Sudanese government's terror.

It is beyond my belief that a senior official complicit in this terror, this genocide could be jetted to Washington with our tax dollars to be commended for his "counter-terrorism" efforts.

This episode is offensive, a slap in the face to every survivor of this horrible ethnic cleansing and is truly a betrayal of the values we share as Americans. A likely perpetrator of genocide should never be the dinner guest of our government.

As a superpower, as a free people, as a people who will generously reach out anywhere in the world to help people in need, we cannot be on the side of the victims and the murders at the same time. The terror the people of Darfur are experiencing every day must be the same War on Terror our nation is fighting – those people's lives have values and it is wrong for the CIA or anyone else in Washington to sell them out.

Let me say in conclusion, that I respect and admire the courage, the determination and amazing spirit of the refugees I have had the privilege to meet and know – both in Minnesota and in Chad.

The struggle and journey to find peace, security, hope and opportunity is real for refugees and anyone forced to flee their home. This is exactly what all human beings seek in life.

It is my hope and it will be my determined commitment to myself, the families I work for in Washington, and the women and children I met from Darfur, that our government work tirelessly to make sure there are fewer refugees, fewer displaced person and much, much more peace, security, hope and opportunity over the next twenty-five years.

This is truly the world I hope we can build together.